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Indonesia : East Timor -- spiralling into violence

Attacks by pro-integration paramilitary groups against unarmed civilians in East Timor must stop and such groups must be immediately disarmed and disbanded, Amnesty International said in a report issued today.

Welcoming the positive role played by the United Nations (UN) to resolve the 24 year conflict in East Timor, the human rights organization also urged Indonesia to allow UN human rights monitoring in the territory.

"This would reinforce efforts made by the UN and others to reach peace in East Timor by bolstering confidence in the east Timorese community and helping protect those most at risk," Amnesty International said.

" As talks on the future of East Timor draw to an end, paramilitaries -- armed and supported by the Indonesian armed forces (ABRI) -- have been let loose to murder, rape and torture innocent civilians whose support for East Timorese independence they do not share," the organization said.

"The timing is no coincidence: all the indications suggest that this is a deliberate attempt by the Indonesian military and pro-integration paramilitary groups to destabilise the situation and thus undermine the diplomatic process to find a political solution to the conflict in East Timor."

Since 5 April 1999, up to 69 people are reported to have been killed by paramilitary groups with military support in a series of incidents. In the most recent incident, five men are reported to have been arrested and extrajudicially executed by ABRI and a local paramilitary unit. This followed an attack by the East Timorese National Liberation Army (Falintil) in which a civilian and a member of ABRI were killed.

Investigations into the killings are being hampered because access to the scene is being prevented by the military and paramilitary groups. Human rights monitors, humanitarian workers and journalists have also been threatened -- and in some cases attacked -- by paramilitary groups.

Fears have intensified in recent days as members of the National Council for Timorese Resistance (CNRT) and their families have received death threats. At least one member of the CNRT, Manuel Magalhaes, was detained in a joint action by ABRI and the paramilitary group Halilintar on 12 April. He is believed to be still in custody. Jose de Andrade, who was arrested with Manuel Magalhaes, was beaten unconscious while in detention. He was subsequently released.

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"The fear in East Timor is palpable," Amnesty International said. "Paramilitary groups are terrorising independence supporters and human rights defenders. If the Indonesian government does not take action to check the activities of these groups the violence will spiral out of control and seriously compromise efforts to find a peaceful solution to the problems in East Timor."

The final round of United Nations (UN) sponsored talks between the Indonesian and Portuguese Governments -- at which an autonomy package for East Timor is expected to be agreed -- is scheduled to take in New York on 21 and 22 April.

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